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Eastern Europe – Imagining Anew

Almost all of the so-called Eastern European countries want to be part of the European Union – or so the argument goes. Andrei Miller analyses in this text the situation of Ukraine, a country in which the influences of power are sharply drawn between the East and the West. Whilst in the recent past, the relations to Russia have become noticeable more unstable, the economic ties remain strong. At the same time, integration into the West looks very uncertain. So which way should Ukraine go? And how can the European Union better incorporate prospective candidates?

Let us start by defining the terms used. We shall leave out of the scope of this article the never-ending dispute about where the "real" borders of Central, East-Central, Eastern and other similar Europes are and what historical, civilisational, geographical, gastronomic and other factors define these borders. Historical and civilisational arguments are subservient to politics, and politics is what this article is about.

In this article, I shall call the countries of the Vysegrad group (Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic) Central Europe, and Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, Eastern Europe. I know that in Ukraine and Belarus there are many people who would disagree with this division. Nobody wants to be an Eastern European or Balkan country any more. On all the outskirts of the *Pax Occidentis*, politicians and intellectuals spend as much effort on region-imagining as they used to spend on nation-imagining. The success of the Hungarians', Poles' and Czechs' project of Central Europe as a "first-tier waiting-room" is too much of a temptation not to try to emulate. In Croatia and Slovenia, in Romania and Lithuania, in Belarus and Ukraine, many politicians and intellectuals are trying to prove that they are part of Central or East-Central Europe too. It's easy to understand them: everybody wants to be rich and healthy rather than poor and sick. Today, Europe's political boundaries do not coincide with its geographic ones: the new boundaries of the successful and soon united Europe run along the Eastern and Southern borders of Central Europe. To be part of Eastern Europe or the Balkans means being in a club of hopeless losers.

Hundreds of books, articles and speeches about Ukraine's and Belarus's membership of European civilisation and the Central European region have been printed and held in these countries and in their Western neighbour, Poland, over the past ten years. What is the political meaning of these conceptions?

The borders of Central Europe have always been drawn to two purposes. On the one hand, there is the desire to be included in the *Pax Occidentis*, and on the other hand, the desire to distinguish oneself from one's Eastern or Southern neighbour. In the case of Ukraine and Belarus, this motive is very important. It

hides both a certain political calculation and a fear, or rather multiple fears, which are all linked to Russia in one way or another.

For a significant part of the Ukrainian elites, the problem of distancing oneself from Russia has been and still is the key problem in the formation of a Ukrainian identity. The high percentage of mixed marriages, about 12 million ethnic Russians¹, and the high level of cultural and linguistic Russification of the East and South of Ukraine strongly polarise the country ethno-culturally, economically and politically. The question of the status of Russian, which is spoken by at least half of the population, remains a subject of bitter disputes in Ukraine, since ultimately the argument is about two mutually exclusive models of nation-building. It is assumed that Russia might take advantage of circumstances coming about independently or as a result of conscious efforts on its part, to destroy Ukraine's statehood and swallow all of Ukraine or part of its territory. From this point of view, any rise of influence of Russia as a state, Russian business or Russian mass media in Ukraine is seen as a threat.

Part of the Belarusian opposition to Lukashenka has similar problems. The weakness of this opposition makes it feel the threat all the more acutely. In Warsaw, many continue to hold that Poland's policy in the East should be based on the old thesis that "without an independent Ukraine there can't be an independent Poland". There is no doubt as to whence the threat to Ukraine's independence is thought to emanate. Even the less catastrophic version of this view still boils down to ascertaining the inconveniences of Poland's "frontier" if not "frontline" position in case NATO and the EU should not expand further East. The question (a rhetorical one in this case) of "Who are we going to be friends against?" is at the origin of most arguments about Polish-Ukrainian friendship.

A similar tune is often sounded by American political scientists: "without Ukraine, Russia can't be an empire; with Ukraine, it automatically becomes one." American consulates have instructions which mention a "statutory presumption of immigration", i.e. the fundamental suspicion that everyone who desires a visa to enter the USA wants to stay there. Similarly, a fundamental suspicion of a desire to restore empire shows through representations of Russia. In any case, the well-known American political scientist, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and many others with him, think that without Ukraine, Russia finds itself outside Europe (which, it is apparently understood, is where it should be); while Ukraine, on the contrary, is palpably closer to Europe without Russia.

Thus the theme of a Russian threat lies at the basis of all these contentions. Some are afraid of being swallowed, others fear, or pretend they fear, a rebirth of empire. In Washington and Warsaw, in Kiev and Minsk many politicians essentially see the situation as a zero-sum game, where compromise is impossible and the loser gets nothing. Ukraine and Belarus are seen as a ferry on a river which must moor at one of the two shores: Russia or the West. Those in Kiev and Minsk who insist that their countries' Eastern borders are the boundaries of Europe often hope that the role of a "border post" raises their chances of obtaining Western economic aid and membership in Western organisations despite their "immaturity" as candidates. In other words, they hope to convert the West's fears of Russia into advantages for themselves.

In Russia, too, there are many who see the situation as a threat, in the framework of a zero-sum game. Ukraine is a key element in that deep-seated phobia which unites most of Russia's population and the Russian elites: the

fear of being cut off, isolated from a united Europe. These fears are common to firm advocates of a European orientation in Russian policy and to the most vociferous isolationists. The latter would make a wonderful object of examination for a psychoanalyst studying the mechanism whereby a patient tries to overcome a deeply-felt fear of failing to reach a certain aim by declaring the aim mistaken.

From any point of view, be it economic, humanitarian or geo-strategic, Ukraine has a key significance for Russia. Suffice it to say that the security of Russia's energy export channels depends on Ukraine, and that the biggest Russian diaspora (over 12 million people) lives here. Since the break-up of the USSR, Russia has always been Ukraine's main creditor, delivering energy resources on credit or at prices below global market rates. Russian capital has been flowing into Ukraine more actively than any other in the course of the privatisations of recent years. Much has been written about the shadowy, often corruption-laden sides of this expansion. It would be naïve to deny this. But it would be just as naïve to reduce everything to this factor or to believe all reports of corruption. Firstly, all those taking part in Ukrainian privatisation actively make use of political and PR resources (including accusations of corruption and "improper" ethnic origin). Secondly, it would be very strange if capital based in a neighbouring country which until recently formed a single economic block with Ukraine, capital whose owners know Ukraine in and out and are not faced with linguistic or cultural barriers, did not play one of the leading parts in the process of privatisation.

Taken together, all these circumstances – from the multi-million-strong Russian minority to the multi-million-strong investments, from the gigantic pipeline network to Ukraine's billions of debt for oil and gas – are what makes Russia struggle for influence in Ukraine and what gives it effective tools for this struggle. It must be noted that Moscow makes very selective use of these tools. It refused to play the Crimean "card", signing a treaty that recognises Ukraine's territorial integrity. So far, Russia has consistently abstained from politically mobilising the Russian minority in Ukraine under nationalist banners. But the problem is that, although this is a struggle where means are used selectively, it is still a struggle in which the West, and above all the United States, perceive a growth of Russian influence as a loss, and vice versa.

So far, all sides have been playing according to these rules. Let's see what this has led to.

If anyone in Ukraine had seriously hoped to repeat the foreign policy trajectory of its Western neighbours, who were quickly admitted into NATO and are (albeit for longer than they had expected) standing on the threshold of EU membership, then such hopes have been sorely disappointed. The USA base their policy towards Ukraine mainly on geo-strategic considerations, understood as a need not to permit its *rapprochement* with Russia. However, this does not mean a readiness to open the gates of NATO to Ukraine and assume a formal obligation to guarantee its security.

It is also evident that Ukraine will not be able to fulfil the conditions of per-capita income, state of legislation, or any other important criteria for EU membership in any foreseeable perspective. Hypothetically, one may imagine Brussels displaying a political will to dispense massive economic and financial aid to a country in order quickly to bring it up to a level permitting seriously to discuss membership. But taking into account population sizes, this scenario may be applicable to Belarus, with its twelve million inhabitants, but certainly not to fifty-million-strong Ukraine.

US economic aid to Ukraine has been significant over the 1990s, but it could not have compensated the losses in its relations with Russia. As for the EU, it never intended to pay Kiev for its anti-Russian orientation. Similarly, attempts at regional co-operation have failed for Ukraine. The priority of Ukraine's immediate Western neighbours, i.e. of the countries of East-Central Europe, was to join NATO and the EU, rather than engaging in a regional co-operation which they saw only as a means to reach their main aim. This is why Ukraine's hopes to join the Vysegrad group or CEFTA (the Central European Free Trade Agreement which unites Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) turned out to be groundless. Ukraine did not even achieve a noticeable improvement in economic co-operation with these countries.

Ukraine's interests have always come second even for Poland (which has frequently declared its intention to play Ukraine's "advocate" in the West), whenever Warsaw was faced with a choice seriously affecting its own interests. In the area of economic co-operation, Warsaw has had absolutely nothing to propose to Ukraine: the two countries' trade volume does not exceed 1 billion dollars, which is five times less than Poland's trade with despised Russia.

Thus, even if Ukraine has reaped a dividend from its policy of distancing itself from Russia, this has not made up for its losses, and in any case has not become a basis for economic growth. The policies of the past decade have resulted in prospects of becoming a kind of buffer between Russia and NATO, in Ukraine's Western boundary looking set to become a closed "Schengen" border, and in tense political and economic relations with Russia. The most striking consequence of this situation has been Moscow's decision to build a pipeline bypassing Ukraine, which has proven highly unreliable as an operator, tending to abuse its monopoly position and regularly drawing gas in a "non-sanctioned way", in other words without paying.

The Belarusian leader Lukashenka, on the other hand, has placed his stake on a *rapprochement* with Russia under anti-Western banners. His country's isolation from the West has been one of the most serious consequences of this policy. It is obvious that Moscow, while aiming at closer integration with Belarus, is constantly ill at ease for having to deal with president Lukashenka, whose legitimacy is questionable. It is no accident that Russia has always stressed that all steps towards delegating sovereignty to the Union of Russia and Belarus must be approved of in referenda in both countries. Moscow is also trying to get Lukashenka to start economic reforms and liberalise the legislation at least up to Russian levels. Everything is relative: Moscow's achievements in these areas, which appear modest when measured up to those of the countries of Central Europe, look very differently when compared to Belarus's.

In general, one should note Russia's role in curbing the authoritarian tendencies of Lukashenka's regime. Russian mass media, especially TV channels, which can be watched by anyone who owns a TV set, remain the most important, in fact virtually the only source of information not controlled by Lukashenka and critical of him.

But in the case of Belarus, just as with Ukraine, the logic of confrontation and zero-sum games also leads to both sides acting in accordance with that famous remark uttered by an American president about a Cold War era Latin American dictator: "Of course he's a son of a bitch. But he's *our* son of a bitch." Moscow

tolerates Lukashenka because it is afraid of risking to lose its last reliable corridor to Europe. It is obvious that the Kremlin would refuse support to Lukashenka if it wasn't afraid that the anti-Russian part of the opposition might come to power.

Recent events in Ukraine have also shown that the participants in the political game are less interested in the fate of the journalist Gongadze² and in president Kuchma's role in this affair than in finding out whose secret service recorded 300 hours of tape in the Ukrainian president's office, and what are the intentions of the people who made these records public. In other words, the question of "whose" politician someone is becomes more important than that person's integrity and competence. This is true of Kuchma, who "suddenly" ceased to be a democrat in Washington's eyes just as he was beginning to listen to Moscow's proposals more often. It's also true of Ukraine's prime minister Viktor Yushchenko, whom Moscow assesses on the basis of his wife's work in the US State Department. (I am not asserting that Yushchenko was "removed" at the Kremlin's behest. But it is obvious that neither president Kuchma nor Moscow did all they could have done to prevent his government's resignation.) Thus all the main countries playing a part in the politics of the East European region are guided not so much by a positive programme as by a desire to neutralise something which, in one way or another, they perceive as a threat. In this situation, from the outset, there is a risk of conflict and rising suspicion; any search for constructive solutions intelligible and acceptable to all sides is rendered difficult.

The countries concerned have long maintained a sort of an unstable balance. But the point is precisely that the balance was unstable and based on confrontation, and could at any moment lead to a crisis. In Ukraine, this crisis has already begun. When it started, those who instigated it thought it would result in Kuchma's resignation, but it was Yushchenko's government that fell victim to the crisis. The Ukrainian "oligarchs" against whom Kuchma, while he was strong enough, could protect Yushchenko's government, profited most of all from this crisis, exposing the logic of the zero-sum game. It's evident that there can't be any winners in this battle of influences, and that Ukraine and Belarus themselves will always be the main losers. (A similar crisis is very likely to take place in Belarus in the near future.)

Those approaches to the part of Europe I have called Eastern that have been dominant over the past decade have turned out to be counterproductive. Firstly, they are not backed by any realistic programme of how the Ukrainian "ferry" might actually reach the Western shore. But let us imagine that one distant but wonderful day Ukraine becomes a member of the EU. Suffice it to picture a Schengen border between Russia and Ukraine to understand that Ukrainian membership in the EU is possible only at the condition of a substantial modification of the significance of this membership for relations with neighbours who are not members, and most of all with Russia. The point is not only the millions of relatives on both sides of the border, nor the Russian fears that I have already described. In Ukraine itself, according to data collected by Ukrainian sociologists, over 80% of the population, and over 90% of urban dwellers, advocate a closer alliance with Russia. Thus there is an evident contradiction between the opinion of an overwhelming majority of the population, and those Ukrainian politicians who see the westward movement as an estrangement from Russia. In other words, there is no solution to the problem of Ukrainian relations with the West outside the general context of Eastern Europe.

Secondly, understanding the situation as a zero-sum game aggravates all existing conflicts of interests in this area and creates new ones. I repeat that in such a game, a decisive victory for one of the players is impossible, while the list of losses and damage grows day by day. And finally, these conceptions' confrontational content creates a misguided agenda which hides the absence of a really constructive programme for this region of Europe.

Is there a way out of this situation? I am convinced that there is. We must imagine Eastern Europe anew, differently. The theme of separation and isolation must give way to the idea of a path to *rapprochement* with Europe common to Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and possibly Moldova. Instead of a river with a "Russian" and a "Western" shore, where the boats of other East European countries must choose where to anchor, we must see the river as a timeline along which all of Eastern Europe, including Russia, is going in one direction: westwards.

This is a challenge for all. The challenge for Russia is patiently to overcome its neighbours' suspicions of neo-imperialism. There is only one way to do this: Russia must learn to follow generally accepted norms of behaviour when defending its political and economic interests in its relations with its neighbours. The challenge for Russia's neighbours is to overcome their deep-seated fears and prejudice, which to no little extent result from genuine traumas of the past. If Russia must prove that its imperial aggressiveness is becoming a thing of the past, then those whom it is proving this to must not be blind and deaf to the changes that are actually and, one should hope, durably taking place in Russian policy.

An Eastern Europe imagined anew is also a challenge for the EU. The European Union must finally start thinking about this region and about a long-term conception that would allow, at a first stage, to soften the consequences of NATO and EU enlargement for the countries of Eastern Europe, and thereafter to allow *rapprochement* and integration. A dream of Europe inspired the people not only of Central, but also of Eastern Europe. Little is left of it today. The countries of Eastern Europe are counting how many chapters they have closed in their talks with Brussels about EU membership. In other words, the dream has turned into real politics. And as usual, something has been lost along the way.

But the others, and first of all Eastern Europe, are so far forced to acquiesce in complete indeterminacy. The phrase "Attention, the doors are closing"³, known to all passengers, gets to wield an ominous meaning. This is felt by everyone in Eastern Europe, if only by seeing the number of countries where they can travel without visa dwindle year by year.

We need a project for the future of Eastern Europe, a project that can only be created by the joint efforts of all Europeans. We need realistic aims to strive towards, we need intermediate landmarks for measuring success on the way to reaching these aims. The more realistic this project will look, the stronger will be the motivation for the authorities and society in all countries of Eastern Europe to comply with the requirements that will unavoidably be associated with it. Isn't this what happened in the countries of Central Europe, when, in their desire to join NATO and the EU as quickly as possible, they managed, for example, to overcome the traditional temptation to discuss the question of the fairness of borders with their neighbours? Aren't the speed and direction of reforms in these countries, despite a sometimes strong opposition, in many ways defined by those same requirements for EU membership?

On what bases is an integration of Eastern Europe possible? What needs to change in Eastern Europe itself? What needs to change in the EU? (Let us not forget that the EU is already changing, preparing to accept new members. It is not just the mechanisms of decision-making that are changing, but the very ideology of enlargement.) Maybe we need some new pan-European organisations uniting the EU and Eastern Europe? We need to think about all this now, so we do not create additional problems in solving this difficult task during the decisions to be made in the future.

Over the past year or two, a number of factors have emerged which raise the chances of a change in the paradigm of relations in the triangle of "Russia, Ukraine & the West". The new authorities in Moscow, who are significantly more energetic and amenable to agreement, has unambiguously declared the European orientation in Russian policy a priority, and has found support among the country's political forces and the overwhelming majority of the population. (According to polls, the tendency towards a *rapprochement* with Europe enjoys even greater support here than in neighbouring Ukraine.) The Ukrainian president has also declared that he is prepared to "go to Europe together with Russia".

Of course, both in Ukraine and in Russia, the authorities often act in a very "un-European" way. But in the economic sphere, they are striving to achieve stable development based on market principles. It is equally obvious that Europe's opinion on issues of political liberty and human rights is very important for both Moscow and Kiev. In the end, the countries of Eastern Europe are carrying out reforms in all spheres, albeit much more slowly and less consistently than Central Europe. They are building their development strategies not on opposition to Europe, but on a desire to be closer to it.

Over recent years, what we have called the West has also changed considerably. Over a long period of time, the USA remained virtually the only real player on this side. The EU has emerged as an independent actor who, while preserving its Atlantic loyalties, is obviously trying to shift the accents in issues of European stability from NATO to European structures. This opens up new opportunities and enables new approaches to the problem of Eastern Europe.

Of course, the US position on these questions will remain a very important factor. Very soon Washington is going to decide whether to include one of the Baltic republics in the next wave of NATO enlargement along with Slovakia and Slovenia. The timing and means of the resolution of such questions are what will determine the atmosphere in which the countries of Eastern Europe will negotiate the bases for their relations with the West. In Europe, too, there are many politicians who are still inclined to think in the categories of a zero-sum game. The situation remains open. Imagining Eastern Europe anew means to imagine all of Europe anew. The stake of the game is whether it will be divided by a border combining features of the Iron Curtain and the cordon against illegal immigrants on the Rio Grande. If this new, destabilising line of profound division is to appear, then the reasons for its appearance will be very far from the allegedly insurmountable civilisational barriers which the American political scientist Samuel Huntington describes in his book "The Clash of Civilisations". It will be a result of the actions of contemporary politicians, not of historical predetermination.

Actually, classifying the population by ethnic membership is not entirely satisfactory in this case; this identity are more revealing.

² Georgi Gongadze was a Kiev–based investigative journalist who disappeared in September 2000. Later on, tapes were circulated among the Ukrainian media which allegedly record Ukraine's president Leonid Kuchma giving orders for Gongadze's "removal". [Translator's note]

³ The standard announcement in the Moscow metro. [Translator's note]

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